



FACT SHEET:

What you need to know about *Clostridium difficile*

William Osler Health Centre takes your care and your safety very seriously and we are committed to transparency. On a monthly basis, beginning in September 2008, we will be reporting our *C. difficile* infection rates on our website at www.williamoslerhc.on.ca.

If you have any questions about the information below or about our hospital's infection prevention and control program, please contact the Corporate Manager, Infection Prevention and Control at (416 or 905) 494-2120 Ext. 33372.

What is *C. difficile*?

C. difficile (*Clostridium difficile*) is a bacteria. *C. difficile* can be part of the normal bacteria in the large intestine and is one of the many bacteria that can be found in stool (a bowel movement).

A *C. difficile* infection occurs when other good bacteria in the bowel are eliminated or decreased allowing the *C. difficile* bacteria to grow and produce toxin. The toxin produced can damage the bowel and cause diarrhea. *C. difficile* is one example of a hospital-acquired infection and is one of the most common infections found in hospitals and long-term care facilities. *C. difficile* has been a known cause of health care associated diarrhea for about 30 years.

Who is at risk for *C. difficile*?

Healthy people are not usually susceptible to *C. difficile*. Seniors, and people who have other illnesses or conditions being treated with antibiotics and certain other stomach medications, are at greater risk of an infection from *C. difficile*.

What are the symptoms of *C. difficile*?

The usual symptoms are mild but can be severe. Main symptoms are watery diarrhea, fever, abdominal pain /tenderness. In some cases there may not be diarrhea. Blood may or may not be present in the stools.

How do you get *C. difficile*?

C. difficile is the most common cause of hospital associated infectious diarrhea. Since it can be part of the normal bacteria that live in the large intestine, taking antibiotics can change the normal balance of bacteria in your large intestine making it easier for *C. difficile* to grow and cause an infection. Old age and the presence of other serious illnesses may increase the risk of *C. difficile* disease.

How does *C. difficile* spread?

When a person has *C. difficile*, the germs in the stool can soil surfaces such as toilets, handles, bedpans, or commode chairs. When touching these items, your hands can become soiled. If you then touch your mouth, you can swallow the germ. Your soiled hands can spread germs that can survive for a long time on other surfaces if not properly cleaned.

The spread of *C. difficile* occurs due to inadequate hand hygiene and environmental cleaning; therefore, proper control is achieved through consistent hand hygiene and thorough cleaning of the patient environment. Good hand hygiene i.e. washing hands thoroughly and often is the single-most effective way to prevent the spread of infectious diseases like *C. difficile*.

How is *C. difficile* diagnosed?

If a *C. difficile* infection is suspected, you will be asked to give a stool (feces) specimen that will be tested for bacteria and/or its toxins.

How is *C. difficile* treated?

Treatment depends on how sick you are. As soon as the antibiotics that caused the symptoms are no longer taken, mild diarrhea will stop. People with mild symptoms may not need treatment. More serious diarrhea can last longer without therapy and antibiotics may be required. If you need to be treated your doctor will order an antibiotic (usually metronidazole or vancomycin) to be taken orally.

What precautions are used to prevent the spread of *C. difficile* in the hospital?

If you are in the hospital and have *C. difficile* diarrhea, you will be put on precautions until you are free from diarrhea for at least two days. Your activities outside the room may be restricted. All health care staff who enter your room will wear a gown and gloves. Everyone **MUST** clean their hands when leaving your room.

What can I do about it?

You and your visitors must pay special attention to good hand washing and follow the instructions given to you by your health care team.

Why are special precautions needed?

Precautions are needed because surfaces like toilets and common areas that hands touch can become contaminated with bacteria. The bacteria can survive on surfaces for a long time if they are not properly cleaned. In order to prevent the spread to other patients in the hospital, it is necessary for everyone to follow these precautions.

What are these special precautions?

- π If necessary, you may be placed in a private room and your activities outside the room may be limited.
- π You will need to take special care with hand washing. If you have any questions about how to wash your hands properly, ask your nurse. **Hands must be washed after using the toilet or bedpan, before eating and each time you leave your room.** It is also very important for all staff and visitors to wash their hands when they arrive and leave your room. Do not be shy about reminding everyone to wash their hands.
- π Signs may be placed in your area to remind everyone about these special precautions.
- π Staff will wear gowns and gloves if they expect to come in contact with stool. A commode may be left in your room specifically for your use.

Can I give *C. difficile* to my family or friends?

Healthy people who are not taking antibiotics are at very low risk of getting this organism. Their best protection against even a small risk is to wash their hands after visiting you and follow the above precautions. Other patients in the hospital are at greater risk of getting *C. difficile* infection.

C. difficile spores can survive on surfaces for weeks. The single best defense against *C. difficile* is frequent and thorough handwashing.